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CIA exec testifies North withheld Iran cargo data

Newhouse News Service
WASHINGTON—CIA counter-terrorism chief Duane "Dewey" Clarridge has



Oliver North

November, 1985.

Clarridge testified before the Iran-contra committees in private on Aug. 6. A deposition released Wednesday quoted him as saying information about the plane's cargo was withheld from him by Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, then a National Security Council aide managing the scheme from the White House.

North and other U.S. officials have said Clarridge was aware both of arms shipments to Iran and aid to contra rebels battling Nicaragua's leftist government. In his testimony, Clarridge denied that he knew about those operations.

But one member of the investigating panels, Sen. William S. Cohen (R-Maine), told Clarridge that he was bothered by the witness's "major lapse in memory" when confronted with testimony and evidence indicating that he actually was told of the Iran and contra developments.

Clarridge also said the late William J. Casey wanted the CIA, which he headed at the time, to run the Reagan administration's entire covert operation involving Iran but was opposed by other top officials in the agency. For that reason, Clarridge said, the Iran operation was turned over to North.

In three months of hearings, the committees heard extensive testimony about the shipment of 80 Hawk missiles, apparently carried out without written presidential intelligence findings.

The "cover story" developed by North and others described the cargo as oil-drilling equipment rather than weapons. Clarridge said

he believed that version until January, 1986, when an unidentified U.S. official told him otherwise.

The cover story later was included in a series of chronologies prepared by North and former national security advisers John M. Poin Dexter and Robert C. McFarlane as the Iran-contra story was breaking publicly late last year.

Clarridge testified that the nature of the cargo in November, 1985, mattered little to the CIA's then-deputy director, John McMahon, because McMahon insisted

that a presidential intelligence finding was required to make the shipment legal.

McMahon was concerned because a private airline employed by the CIA had been involved in the shipment, the deposition indicated.

Clarridge said McMahon "had learned of the flight and the use of our proprietary, and he said to me that it didn't make much difference as far as he could see whether they were oil-drilling spare parts or it was gunpowder, weapons—or whatever."

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